

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I write to you today to express my deep concern and disappointment regarding the reports of fraudulent misuse of federal funding meant to feed hungry children. I am appalled to learn of such heinous acts and the theft of resources strictly meant for our most vulnerable populations. I condemn such actions and I am grateful for the work being done by multiple local and federal government agencies to uncover these repulsive, fraudulent actions, and I am eager to know what steps are being taken to protect these critical resources going forward.

As someone who has faced childhood hunger, I have made combating this epidemic a major priority since taking office. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent school closures, I immediately began working with the Committee on Education and Labor to develop the MEALS Act (H.R. 6187), ensuring no child goes hungry while not in school. Evidence shows that millions of children have benefited from these programs, especially during these unpredictable times.

However, recent investigations show that members of a non-profit organization located in my district stole and laundered over \$200 million federal funds from the USDA for personal benefits, such as for real estate, trips, and luxury goods. Since this discovery, the Minnesota Department of Education has begun the process of removing Feeding Our Future from the USDA Summer Food Service Program and Child and Adult Care Food Program. While this is an excellent first step, it is certainly not enough to solve the problem or prevent such criminal misuse of funds in the future.

As such, I'm seeking information from your agency on what steps are being taken to root out fraudulent use of the federal programs and what Congressional and Administrative actions you consider necessary to further safeguard these programs and prevent criminal activity going forward. I kindly request your detailed responses to the following questions:


1. What resources are being allocated to investigate fraud within these programs, and what other agencies, local authorities, committees of jurisdiction, and partners is USDA working with?
2. What steps will the USDA take to recuperate misused funds and what actions and/or fines do we expect to be levied?
3. Will there be any restitution made to those communities defrauded?
4. What are the current safeguards in place to identify cases of fraud?

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5. What types of mechanisms are set during the application and approval process to help avoid fraud?
6. Does USDA provide any guidance and/or technical assistance to state agencies to detect/correct the mismanagement of funds after a sponsor's application has been approved?
7. What are the periodic reporting and compliance requirements of the recipients of such funds and are any steps being taken to strengthen these requirements to detect fraud earlier in this process?
8. How does the USDA intend to balance the need to have broad access to meal programs and timely distribution of funds without making the administrative process overcomplicated and burdensome to the point that it would discourage good actors?
9. What can Congressional offices and local leaders do to prevent such fraudulent activities?

I look forward to your responses and hope to continue working closely with your agency on our shared mission of serving hungry children throughout the country.

Sincerely,



Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress